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Army lifts ban on recruits with mental health issues

Self-mutilation, substance abuse, depression are no longer disqualifying

Tom Vanden Brook
USA TODAY

WASHINGTON – People with a history of “self-mutilation,” bipolar disorder, depression, and drug and alcohol abuse can now seek waivers to join the Army under an unannounced policy enacted in August, according to documents obtained by USA TODAY.

The decision to open Army recruiting to those with mental health conditions comes as the service faces the challenging goal of recruiting 80,000 new soldiers through September 2018. To meet last year’s goal of 69,000, the Army accepted more recruits who fared poorly on aptitude tests, increased the number of waivers granted for marijuana use and offered hundreds of millions of dollars in bonuses.

Expanding the waivers for mental health is possible in part because the Army now has access to more medical information about each potential recruit, Lt. Col. Randy Taylor, an Army spokesman, said in a statement to USA TODAY. The Army issued the ban on waivers in 2009 amid an epidemic of suicides among troops.

“The decision was primarily due to the increased availability of medical records and other data which is now more readily available,” Taylor’s statement said. “These records allow Army officials to better document applicant medical histories.”

But accepting recruits with those mental health conditions in their past carries risks, according to Elspeth Cameron Ritchie, a psychiatrist who retired from the Army as a colonel in 2010 and is an expert on waivers for military service. People with a history

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The Army stopped accepting waivers for mental health issues in 2009, amid a rash of suicides in the military, but has quietly resumed the practice. SCOTT OLSON/GETTY IMAGES



The Rev. Will Davis (from left) of Invisible Reality Ministries, Toni Wagner of St. Catherine Catholic Church and Frank Finch III of Mt. Calvary Lutheran Church walk along one of the blocks in the Sherman Park neighborhood revitalized by Southeastern Wisconsin Common Ground. The three worked on the Common Ground campaign that forced lenders to reinvest in the community that was decimated in the foreclosure crisis. RICK WOOD / MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL

Faith communities continue push for SOCIAL JUSTICE

Coalition insisted on reinvestment

Annysa Johnson Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
USA TODAY NETWORK – WISCONSIN

Seven years ago, the 2300 block of N. 46th St. in Milwaukee’s Sherman Park neighborhood was practically in shambles. Houses were run down and in foreclosure or headed there. Several were vacant; some had been taken over by squatters.

Today, there is no sign of the blight that threatened the block. Most homes have been repaired and tidied; a few have been remodeled inside and out. New owners have moved in and property values are up.

The transformation of the block is the work of Southeastern Wisconsin Common Ground, a coalition of about 50 mostly faith-based organizations that forced a handful of billion-dollar banks to reinvest more than \$30 million into a Milwaukee neighborhood that was all but gutted during the foreclosure crisis.

“While the city was drawing up a task force, we went after the banks that



More about the story

For more coverage marking 50 years since the open housing marches, including photo galleries, a timeline and videos of original marchers, go to jsonline.com/50year.

caused the problem,” said Bob Connolly, a longtime community organizer who founded the group in 2008. “We went to their shareholders’ meetings. We went after their CEOs. ... We went after their brands. ... And we made them do the right thing.”

Fifty Years after Father James Groppi, a Catholic priest, and the Milwaukee NAACP Youth Council led 200 nights of protests that pushed for an open housing law, people of faith continue to play a significant role in advocating for social and economic justice in Wisconsin.

There is no central leader. No Groppi, or the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

Still, activists continue to mobilize through their parishes and congregations; through interfaith coalitions; faith-based lobbying offices in Madison; and organizations such as Common Ground.

There have been incremental victories. But many at the forefront say the work is as arduous as ever, made increasingly difficult by the widening chasm between the rich and poor; deeply ingrained attitudes about race and class; and the growing polarization of Americans in their politics, in their neighborhoods and in the pews.

“One thing that I’ll say is ... this work is much, much, much longer term than most of us thought when we got involved,” said David Liners, a former Catholic priest who heads WISDOM, a statewide network of 165 congrega-

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Virtual visits: Health care without leaving home

Many providers offer service for \$50 or less

Guy Boulton Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
USA TODAY NETWORK – WISCONSIN

Twice this year, Wendy Harrop has gotten medical care that normally would have meant a trip to an urgent care clinic. The first time was for a sinus infection, the second for a spider bite. Both times she got the care she needed — and saved time and money.

The service she used enables anyone to get medical care for simple conditions from a doctor or a nurse practitioner by telephone or, better still, by video chat using a

computer, tablet or smartphone.

“It’s very convenient,” Harrop said. “I can take care of it when it fits into my day, rather than when I can get an appointment.”

Harrop’s experience shows why telehealth, particularly so-called virtual visits, is on its way to becoming an integral part of primary care.

Aurora Health Care and Froedtert Health now offer virtual visits for less than \$50. So, too, do many other health systems throughout the state, including Marshfield Clinic, UW Health, UnityPoint Health and Bellin Health.

Virtual visits typically can be used to diagnose and treat sinus infections, pink eye, urinary tract

infections, bronchitis, flu, allergies and other common conditions.

“People who are using these services are using them for conditions that are relatively straightforward,” said Andy Anderson, Aurora’s chief medical officer. “It’s going to save a lot of time for people.”

Virtual visits also hold the potential of lowering costs by lessening unnecessary visits to doctors’ offices, urgent care clinics and emergency departments. And they could improve access to care by freeing physicians to spend more time with patients who have complex health conditions.

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HUNDLEY DELIVERS SPORTS



Green Bay Packers quarterback Brett Hundley gestures downfield before throwing a touchdown to Davante Adams against the Chicago Bears at Soldier Field in Chicago on Sunday. The Packers won, 23-16. JIM MATTHEWS / USA TODAY NETWORK-WISCONSIN